

SOCRATES ON POETRY AND THE WISDOM OF SIMONIDES

D Futter (University of the Witwatersrand)

In books 2 and 3 of the *Republic*, Socrates criticizes Homer and Hesiod for telling the greatest falsehoods about the greatest things; in book 1, he assumes that Simonides is a ‘wise and blessed’ bard who knows the truth. Socrates’ position on the authority of poets seems contradictory. Can this tension be resolved? I argue that it can be. Building on but revising Nicholas Pappas’ suggestion that Socrates’ charity in interpreting poetry is a form of disrespect, I show that the contradiction in his position is not in principle but in use. Socrates assumes that a true poet must be a knower of the good; however, in book 1, he uses this assumption to absolve Simonides from error, whereas in books 2 and 3, he infers that Homer, Hesiod, and other lesser figures are not true poets. This difference in use is to be explained by changes in interlocutors and a material concern with early childhood education.

Keywords: Plato; Socrates; *Republic*; Simonides; Socratic method; poetry.

1. Introduction

In his discussion of how to educate guardians for his beautiful city, Socrates recommends music and poetry for the young (*Resp.* 376e–403c). But since young souls are impressionable, taking the shape of whatever pattern one imposes upon them (377a), the city’s founders should not, he says, ‘carelessly allow the children to hear any old stories, told by just anyone’ (377b).¹ They will ‘select their stories whenever they are fine or beautiful and reject them when they aren’t’ (377b).

Given this principle of education, Socrates says, ‘many of the tales they tell now will have to be thrown out’ (377c), since ‘telling the greatest lie about the most important things doesn’t make a fine story’ (377e). He refers to Hesiod’s account of Uranus’ rape of Gaia and ‘how Cronus punished him for it, and how he was in turn punished’ (377e–378a), and also, Homer’s account of ‘Hera being chained by her son’, ‘Hephaestus being hurled from heaven by his father when he tried to help his mother, who was being beaten’, and ‘the battle of the gods’ (378d). It is clear from these passages, and others, that Socrates is willing to attribute

¹ Translations of *Republic* are based on the Grube/Reeve rendition in Cooper & Hutchinson (eds.) 1997.

falsehood to the most honourable of the bards.² We cannot avoid the conclusion that, for him, Homer, Hesiod, and other lesser figures, are not wise and good.³

Socrates' criticism of the poets and claims about the 'ancient quarrel' (607b) between philosophy and poetry have been much discussed in the literature.⁴ Almost entirely overlooked, I will argue, is his extreme deference to one poet in particular: Simonides of Ceos.⁵ For, in his exchange with Polemarchus in book 1 of the *Republic*, Socrates assumes that Simonides is a wise and godlike man (331e6), who would not speak falsely (331e5).⁶ While criticising Homer and Hesiod for telling the greatest falsehoods about the greatest things, he is willing to grant that Simonides knows the truth. Socrates' position on the authority of poets seems contradictory.

This essay is divided into two parts. In part 1 (§§2–6), I support the claim that Socrates treats Simonides as a moral authority by tracing out the contours of his dialogue with Polemarchus. In part 2 (§§7–10), I take up the question of how to resolve the apparent contradiction: why does Socrates criticise Homer and Hesiod but honour Simonides as a wise and blessed poet (335e7–9)?

2. *Simonides on justice: Giving to each what is fitting*

Polemarchus drags Simonides into the discussion to save his father from the elenchus. In response to Socrates' argument that 'speaking the truth and paying one's debts' could not be the definition of justice (331d2–3), he appeals to the authority of a poet: 'It certainly is', he says, 'if Simonides is to be trusted' (331d4–5).

² Socrates makes clear that his concerns are independent of the distinction between epic, lyric, and tragedy (379a).

³ I focus on Socrates' criticisms of poetic content rather than poetic form. Regarding the latter, as is well known, Socrates argues against mimesis in book 3 and, also, in book 10, where he banishes the 'honeyed muse' (607a5) from the beautiful city. The precise relationship between these two arguments for censorship is controversial.

⁴ See, for example, Murdoch 1977, Nightingale 1995, Burnyeat 1997, and White 1989–1990.

⁵ Only a few scholars give attention to the role of Simonides in Socrates' dialogue with Polemarchus. One of those who does, Henry Teloh, remarks that his 'claims about the poets are, indeed, confusing' (1986:89). Terence Irwin correctly observes that Socrates' 'charitable attitude to Simonides is ... to be taken seriously' but does not explore the significance of this (1995:173). For more on charity and interpretation, see §§7–8 below. On Simonides as historical figure, see Molyneux 1992.

⁶ After book 1, there is only one reference to Simonides: a quotation by Adeimantus in book 2 (365c). While we would expect Socrates to disagree with the sentiments expressed, he does not address the point with specific detail.

It turns out, however, that Simonides did not say quite what Cephalus did. What the poet said, Polemarchus clarifies in response to Socrates' request that he tell what Simonides said correctly about justice (331e1–2), is that it is just to give to each what is owed (331e3–4). 'In this', he continues, 'he seems to me to have spoken beautifully' (331e3–4).⁷

Socrates' response is striking in its deference. First, he attributes knowledge: Simonides is a wise and godlike man (331e6);⁸ his utterances carry weight; he should not be thought to have spoken falsely (331e5). Secondly, he applies a norm derived from the poet's authority to the problem of the creditor who has gone mad (331e9–332a2) to infer, not that the objection is wrong, or the authority misguided, but that Simonides does not mean that it is just to give to each what is owed (331e7–8; 332a7–8). What is his true meaning, then? Socrates does not know (331e7–8). By professing ignorance, he casts his interlocutor in the role of exegete — speaking not for himself, but for another. Perhaps Polemarchus knows what Simonides really takes justice to be (331e7–8).

Given his role as interpreter, Polemarchus must explicate the poet's meaning in a way that is consonant with Simonides' 'wise and godlike' character. He is not a man to stand down. In response to the suggestion that Simonides means something different from 'this sort of thing' when he says that it is just to give back what is owed (332a7–8), he, swearing an oath to Zeus, rejoins: 'Of course he did. He meant that friends owe it to friends to do some good and nothing bad' (332a9–10). The saying that it is just to give to each what is owed has been reinterpreted. Simonides' true meaning and his overt meaning are different: he is, as it were, a verbal ironist.

'I understand', says Socrates (332a11), framing a hypothesis as to what the poet has in mind: 'You mean someone does not give back to a lender what he is owed by giving him gold, when the giving and taking would be harmful, and both he and the lender are friends' (332a11–b2).⁹ The young man accepts the interpretation: it correctly represents what he thinks that Simonides means (332b4).

⁷ James Adam writes: '[this is probably] some current saying attributed to Simonides: there is nothing like it in his fragments' (2009 [1902]:13, note on 331e). Note, however, that Socrates describes Simonides as a poet throughout the discussion.

⁸ Some might protest that Socrates' attribution of authority to Simonides is ironic. This is, no doubt, the case. But to say that his treatment of Simonides is ironic does not end the inquiry: it merely raises, more urgently, the question of why Socrates uses irony of this sort. If his handling of Simonides is ironic, then why does he withhold this form of irony from Homer and Hesiod? For suggested answers to these questions, see §10 below.

⁹ We notice that Socrates has slyly replaced the question of returning weapons with a question about returning gold. See Bloom 1968:317.

Since Polemarchus has linked justice to friendship, Socrates asks about its relation to enmity: should one also give to enemies what is owed to them (332b5)? Cephalus' son insists that enemies should get what they are owed, which is what is fitting to them, that is, something bad (332b6–8). To this Socrates replies by separating the poet's true meaning from his overt meaning, attributing the discrepancy to irony, and framing another account of what he wished to say. 'It seems, then, that Simonides was speaking in riddles — just like a poet! — when he said what justice was' (332b9–c1). The poet is, on this account, an ironist who conceals his true meaning. 'For what he really meant, it appears, is that it is just to give to each what is fitting, and this is what he called giving to him what he is owed' (332b9–c3).

3. *Simonides on justice: Helping friends and harming enemies*

On Socrates' reconstruction, then, Simonides meant to say that justice is giving to each what is fitting (332c1–3). 'What did you think he meant?' retorts Polemarchus, thereby accepting his proposal (332c4). As we shall see, this account of justice is upheld in book 1 — what is rejected is a particular understanding of it. Moreover, since the account is consistent with the overall interpretation of the *Republic*,¹⁰ and, in fact, any other theory of justice,¹¹ it appears that Simonides has spoken the truth.

However, Socrates is dissatisfied; he seeks, in addition, an account of what is fitting. He introduces the idea of art or *technē* (336c6–7), not as an explicit claim, but as a condition of appropriate treatment.¹² By analogies with cooking and medicine, he leads Polemarchus to the question of what fitting things the art called justice distributes, and to what or whom (332d2–3). The 'heir to the argument' has been paying close attention: 'if we are to follow the previous answers', he says, 'justice would be the art that gives benefits to friends and harms to enemies' (332d4–8).¹³

Have we finally, Socrates asks, arrived at the poet's true meaning? Does he mean that justice is treating friends well and enemies badly (332d7–8)? I do think this, replies Polemarchus (332d9). Socrates does not agree, however, and sets about arguing against the interpretation. In this, he does not attempt to

¹⁰ See Kosman 2007:125–26 and Irwin 1995:173–74.

¹¹ For a recent endorsement of the view, see Cohen 2009:7.

¹² For useful discussion, see Joseph's essay, 'Plato's *Republic*: The argument with Polemarchus' (1935). See also Lachterman 1989:146–47.

¹³ The eponymous interlocutor in *Cleitophon* (410a6–b1) identifies this view of justice as Socrates' own. He goes on to say that the position was refuted by arguments like those deployed against Polemarchus (*Resp.* 335b2ff.). For these points, see Strauss 1964:70.

show that the wise poet is wrong but that they have not properly grasped his account.

4. *Misunderstanding Simonides, I: The utility of justice*

Socrates' interrogation of Simonides' account goes through three main stages. In the first stage, he considers the way in which specific kinds of knowledge are connected to benefit and harm. Who, for example, is best equipped to harm enemies and benefit sick friends in matters of health and disease? The doctor, of course (332d10–12). And who is most able to do the same in a storm at sea? The sea-captain (331e1–2). This reasoning leads, ineluctably, to the question of the actions and work (*ergon*) in which the just man is most able to benefit friends and harm enemies (331e3–4). Polemarchus answers that it is in 'wars and alliances' (332e5), and, strikingly, Socrates accepts this suggestion (332e6).¹⁴ But does this mean that justice is useless to those not making war? (332e11) Polemarchus, still speaking on behalf of Simonides, rejects the implication (332e12).

Socrates next asks about the nature of the useful things that the just person can produce or acquire in times of peace (333a10–11). If farming is useful for getting food, and shoemaking for acquiring shoes, then what does Polemarchus say about the just man's *technē*? For what 'procuring', or service, would it be useful (333a10–11)? By dialectical questioning, he leads Polemarchus to the claim that the just person is more useful than other craftsmen for keeping money safe (333c7), that is, when it is not being used but 'left lying' (333c8–9).¹⁵ Justice is useless for each thing when it is in use, useful for it only in its uselessness (333d10–11). 'I'm afraid so', concedes Polemarchus.

Socrates next shifts abruptly to another line of reasoning. He introduces the idea that the artisan is best at producing and preventing — and, by this means, develops an account of guardianship. The man who is best able to strike in a fight, whether this be boxing, or some other, is best able to avoid being struck, that is, to guard against it (333e3–4). Similarly, the person who is most able to guard

¹⁴ 'Justice is the art which enables men to become a fighting team each member of which helps every other so that they can jointly defeat their enemies and inflict on them any harm they deem good' (Strauss 1964:71–72). We notice that Socrates and Polemarchus later form a 'fighting team' against Thrasymachus (335e). As Craig points out, their conversation 'concludes with a formal alliance being struck, making explicit [Polemarchus'] willingness to 'do battle in common' defence of a proper respect for the wise' (1994:4).

¹⁵ As Joseph points out, this returns Polemarchus to the position from which he had started, viz. his father's. '[It] is in virtue of his justice that a man restores what has been lodged with him' (1935:9).

against disease is also most able to produce it unnoticed (333e6–7). From this it follows, Socrates suggests, that the thing of which somebody is a good guardian is also something of which he is a good thief (334a5–6), for which reason, if the just man is good for guarding money, he must also be good at stealing it (334a7–8).¹⁶ In short, the just person has come to light as a sort of thief (334a10). For this reason, he is not even useful for guarding money when it is ‘left lying’ (333c8–9).

Socrates brings this stage of argument to a close by suggesting that Polemarchus, and Simonides also, it appears, learnt the view of justice as expertise in theft from Homer (334a10–b3),¹⁷ presenting the conclusion of the foregoing argument as an interpretation of the poets’ true meaning: ‘Then according to you, Homer, and Simonides’, he says, ‘justice seems to be an art of stealing for the benefit for friends and harm of enemies’ (334b4–5).¹⁸ The exegetical tenor of the discourse is reinforced by Socrates’ request for confirmation of this interpretation: ‘Isn’t that what you meant?’ (334b6).

Polemarchus is unwilling to accept this account of his and the poet’s meaning (334b7). While holding on to the traditional account of justice (334b8–9), now abstracted from the authority of Simonides, he rejects Socrates’ reconstruction of his meaning. Swearing an oath to Zeus, he confesses to no longer knowing what he says or means (334b7), though, significantly, justice — and doing what is fitting — still seems to him to be benefitting friends and harming enemies (334b8–9). Polemarchus’ perplexity is due to his inability to understand, and speak, what seems to him to be true. The deep meaning of Simonides’ formula remains unreconstructed.

5. *Misunderstanding Simonides, II: True friends and enemies*

In the second stage of argument, Socrates focusses on the notions of friendship and enmity that are embedded in their interpretation of Simonides’ account. He asks his interlocutor whether he says that friends are those who seem to be useful, or those that are really so, irrespective of whether they seem to be, and *mutatis mutandis* for enemies (334c1–3). Polemarchus opts for the first rendering, observing that one loves those whom one considers to be useful, and hates those whom one considers bad (334c4–5). In response, Socrates raises the possibility of making a mistake, judging some to be useful when they aren’t, and the opposite for believed enemies (334c6–8). In such cases, the good are enemies and the bad are friends (334c10);

¹⁶ See Aristotle, *An. Pr.* 48b5 and *Eth. Nic.* 1129a13.

¹⁷ The reference is to Homer’s description of Autolycus, Odysseus’ grandfather, as ‘better than everyone at lying and stealing’ (334a11–b3). See *Od.* 19.395–396.

¹⁸ On Socrates’ identification of Simonides’ view with that of Homer, see §§ 9–10.

and so, according to Simonides, it would be just to harm good people and benefit bad ones (334c12–d1). Yet, since good people are just, and don't do wrong, it would be just to do bad things to those who do no wrong (334d5–6). Socrates frames this conclusion as an interpretation of what Polemarchus says or means (334d5). But the latter is again unwilling to accept the reconstruction: 'not at all, Socrates, the saying (*logos*) is likely to be bad' (334d7–8).

Socrates, still working with the subjective notion of friendship and enmity, turns things around once again. If it is unjust to harm the just and benefit the unjust, then it is just to harm the unjust and benefit the just (334d9–10). Polemarchus is more satisfied with this articulation. But from this it follows, for people who make mistakes, that it is just to harm their friends (since they are bad) and to benefit their enemies (since they are good) — in other words, exactly the opposite of what they had said Simonides meant (334d12–e4). This interpretation does not then explicate the wise poet's meaning; the inquiry has been unsuccessful.

At this point, Polemarchus says they should revise their account of friendship (334e5–6). Perhaps a friend is somebody who is believed to be useful and is actually useful; and likewise for an enemy (334e10–335a2). Friendship and enmity are now intimately connected to the good and the bad (335a4–5);¹⁹ knowing one's friends and enemies is a difficult task indeed. And, with regard to the job of understanding the poet, Simonides, Socrates offers another account: it is just to benefit a friend who is good and harm an enemy who is bad (335a8–10). Polemarchus thinks this has been very beautifully said (335b1).

6. *Misunderstanding Simonides, III: Virtue and harm*

In the third stage of dialogue, Socrates raises the question of whether it belongs to the just man to harm anyone (335b2–3). Polemarchus sticks to his guns: it is necessary to harm bad men and enemies (335b4–5). In response, Socrates connects harm to virtue (*arête*). Horses that are harmed are made worse with respect to the virtue of horses. And similarly, for dogs (335b6–11). The same point would seem to apply to human beings, who would, by this reasoning, be harmed in a virtue distinctive of humans (335c1–2). And if that is justice, as Socrates suggests (335c4), it would follow that human beings who are harmed become more unjust (335c6–7). Hence their interpretation of Simonides' definition implies that just people can make others unjust by means of justice, and, more generally, that the good make others bad by virtue (335c14–d1). This is, according to Polemarchus, impossible (335d2).

¹⁹ See James Adam's note on 335a, 2009 [1902]:20.

In what turns out to be the final movement of the discussion, Socrates extends the argument from goodness to harm. He does this by introducing another core idea, related to that of virtue, viz. work or ‘business’ (*ergon*), applying it to two examples: heat has the ‘business’ of heating rather than cooling, dryness the ‘work’ of drying rather than wetting (335d3–5). In this vein, the work of goodness is not harm, but benefit (335d7), so that a just person, being good, would not harm anyone — whether he be a friend or somebody else. This would be, rather, the unjust person’s business (335d9–12). Polemarchus gives warm assent to this conclusion: ‘you seem to me to speak truth in every way, Socrates’, he says (335d13).

Has Simonides’ account of justice been undone? Not at all, for, as Socrates goes on to observe, the refutation targets the specific interpretation of giving what is owed in terms of harming enemies and benefiting friends (335e1–3). Whoever puts forward this view is not wise, he says, for it is not true: it is never just to harm anybody (335e4–5). After Polemarchus gives assent once more (335e6), Socrates uses the assumption that Simonides is wise to infer from the conclusion they have reached that neither he, nor any other ‘wise and blessed man’, made this claim (335e9).²⁰ Instead they should attribute the view to someone bad, who, presumably, does not know justice — perhaps a tyrant, or ‘some rich man considering himself to have great power’ (336a5–7). Socrates refers by name to Periander, Perdiccas, Xerxes, and Ismenias the Theban (336a5–7).²¹

After restating the point that justice is not what ‘such people’ say it is, Socrates raises once more the question of what justice and the just might be. The dialogue with Polemarchus and Simonides is brought to a sudden end, however, as Thrasymachus of Chalcedon, ‘coiled up like a wild beast’, launches himself into the arena (336b5–6).

The first part of my argument is now complete. I have shown that Socrates and Polemarchus assume throughout their dialogue that Simonides is a moral authority. Whenever they encounter difficulties with the position attributed to him, they reinterpret these as indications of their own inability to grasp his meaning. The knowledge of justice that they seek is, Socrates implies, possessed by a ‘wise and blessed’ poet (335e7–9).

²⁰ They will ‘fight as partners against anyone who tells [them] that Simonides, Bias, Pittacus, or any other of [their] wise and blessed men said this’ (335e7–9). For the significance of this statement, see §10.

²¹ For information on each of these figures, see Nails 2002.

7. *Socrates on charity in interpretation*

In an article entitled ‘Socrates’ charitable treatment of poets’, Nicholas Pappas offers an account of Socrates’ method of interpreting poetry that promises to dissolve the contradiction between his kid-gloved handling of Simonides and his censure of Homer and Hesiod.²² Drawing on his reading of Simonides in *Protagoras*, Pappas argues that Socrates adapts the poem to suit his own purposes, almost entirely disregarding the question of what the poet said and meant.²³ This style of interpretation is not, in his estimation, a joke or parody, as other scholars have thought, but a carefully crafted method.

According to Pappas, a Socratic reading of a poem ‘maximizes the truth of the interpretation’,²⁴ that is, follows ‘the injunction to have as many sentences as possible come out true under the interpretation, or to assume as far as possible that everything under interpretation is true’.²⁵ Therefore, whenever a poet contradicts what Socrates takes to be the case, he spirits it away by forcing the verse to fit his world-picture.

If charity is a virtue and an attempt to do good, then what, precisely, is wrong with this method? For Pappas, the problem is that Socrates’ attempt to maximise truth in interpretation leads him to ignore the distinctive voice of the poet: the author’s intentions, which Pappas identifies with his ‘otherness’, are wholly ignored.²⁶ For this reason, Socrates’ charity constitutes a form of disrespect — of not looking, and not paying attention. As he explains:

Ethically, ... unrestricted charity betrays a lack of respect for its poor recipient. We may say the same of interpretive charity; something like respect for the author might then be thought of as the constraint opposed to charity. What keeps a person from finding just anything in a text is this attentiveness to a person speaking through the text. When charity reigns unrestricted, as it does in Socrates’ interpretations, there is no room for an author — which is to say, no room for a genuinely other or outside voice. Socrates has killed the poet with kindness.²⁷

²² Pappas 1989b. See also Pappas 1989a.

²³ This point is uncontroversial and does not require argument. As for the content of the ‘misinterpretation’, Socrates interprets the poet’s meaning in terms of the distinction between being and becoming, the impossibility of voluntary wrongdoing, and the unity of virtue. See Pappas 1989b:249–52.

²⁴ Pappas 1989b:256.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Pappas 1989b:259.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 257.

One is reminded of a remark made by Lucian Freud: 'I paint people not because of what they are like, not exactly in spite of what they are like, but how they happen to be'.²⁸ Relatedly, for Pappas, one exhibits respect for the author by reading her poems in a way that neither idealises them, nor breaks them down, but recognises them for what they are.

If Socrates applies the same method of charity to Simonides in the *Republic*, and the method is, as Pappas claims, a way of disregarding poet and poem, then the contradiction between his handling of Simonides and his rough treatment of Homer and Hesiod will disappear. In fact, Pappas puts the argument more strongly: Socrates' charity in interpretation does not contradict the attitude exhibited in books 2 and 3, but supports it:

The real joke for Socrates is that he does not care what Simonides [in *Protagoras*] may actually have believed. From this implicit disregard for authorial intention, it is a short step to Socrates' overt disregard for poets in other discussions, such as his bowdlerization of Homer in *Republic* II and III. Socrates feels justified in emending Homer for the young guardians' education because the unity of the poems, or Homer's greater purpose in writing them, is irrelevant to him.²⁹

A charitable reading is, for Socrates, one that maximises true statements about virtue and the gods, which is determined, in the end, by what he himself thinks. For this reason, he does not respect the integrity of the poets' works but rewrites them as he sees fit. In short, Socrates' charity to the poets constitutes his *mistreatment* of them.

8. *Charity and authority*

Though Pappas' essay is useful in clarifying the terms of discussion, I doubt that his account of Socrates' charity in interpretation can be applied to the *Republic*. More precisely, Socrates' interpretation of Simonides in book 1 does not make use of charity in a form that supports Pappas' claims about its continuity with his 'mistreatment' of the poets in later books.

Consider again the central features of Socrates' dialogue with Polemarchus. First, he assumes that Simonides cannot be wrong; he cannot have said anything untrue or unjust about justice.³⁰ For this reason, Socrates infers from apparent

²⁸ Quoted in Smee 2007:7.

²⁹ Pappas 1989b:259.

³⁰ As noted above, while Socrates and Polemarchus make repeated references to Simonides as poet, they do not refer to specific works or verses. I believe that this

difficulties that their interpretations do not reconstruct the wise man's saying. Logical refutations are taken to imply that the poet communicates in riddles (332b9–c1), which they have failed to solve. Moreover, the inquiry in the dialogue is in the end unsuccessful: the meaning of Simonides' account of justice as giving to each what is fitting is not satisfactorily reconstructed.

On this reading, it is not quite right to say that Socrates forces an interpretation on the poet; instead, he argues that Simonides *cannot* mean that justice is helping friends and harming enemies, presenting criticisms of this account as reasons for not ascribing it to him.³¹ To be sure, in so doing, he uses his own understanding of justice to make judgments as to what is and is not reasonable to ascribe to a wise and blessed poet. Moreover, since the poet is an authority who cannot be wrong or bad, they must, he implies, continue their inquiry into what he might mean.

The difference between imposing and withholding an interpretation weakens Pappas' claim that Socrates' charity to the poets is apiece with his 'bowdlerizing' them. In *Republic* 1, Socrates does not disregard the authorial voice, but fixes a standard against which all interpretations of it are to be measured — the poet must be considered wise and good. His charity to Simonides, if one calls it that, thus extends to the apprehension of the content of the poems. It is a form of inquiry designed to recover his understanding of justice. By contrast, in books 2–3, Socrates does not pretend to be excavating the meaning of Homer and Hesiod. He is upfront about what he is doing: revising their works and changing their significance. For this reason, the contradiction between Socrates' handling of Simonides and his handling of Homer and Hesiod remains.

9. *True and good souls*

According to Pappas, Socrates' 'treatment of Simonides [in the *Protagoras*] resembles strikingly his treatment of his live interlocutors'.³² As he writes:

[Socrates'] leading, even tendentious questions subject his interlocutors' statements to inquiry they were never prepared to address, and he reaches conclusions which the interlocutors would not have taken themselves to believe — indeed, which they typically deny.

supports the argument I will give in §10, where I argue that Socrates treats Simonides more as an ideal type than a historical figure.

³¹ In contradistinction with his interpretation of Simonides in *Protagoras*, at least, as Pappas reads it, Socrates does not assume that the poet's meaning is the same as his own.

³² Pappas 1989b:254.

The questions, the unexpected inquiry, and the unintended conclusions are all here too, together with Socrates' insistence that this conclusion is what the other person really believes. If this is a parody of interpretation, then Socrates' whole interrogative method is a parody.³³

Pappas is, in my view, right to emphasise the connection between Socrates' method of interpreting poetry and his method of elenctic examination.

When Socrates leads the interlocutor in argument, he does so by measuring him against the standard of the good and the true. He assumes that the interlocutor has knowledge of virtue, and thus, if some statement of his should seem to contradict this, that his true meaning remains concealed.³⁴ This true meaning is the knowledge of good and bad that constitutes the interlocutor's deep understanding of virtue.³⁵ By working in this way, Socrates leads him to distinguish between his opinions on a topic and the knowledge that seems to underly his ability to recognise that they do not constitute what he really thinks.

As we have seen, Pappas recommends a principle of respect in interpretation — respect for the otherness of the poet.³⁶ In the attempt to understand what the author is saying, one should recognise the other as other, and, in a way, as an object worthy of concern. '*The fact that someone said these words is why they are thought to be worth hearing*'.³⁷ Thus, given the parallel between the elenchus and the method of interpreting poetry, Socrates should exhibit respect for what the interlocutor says and thinks in its confused and contradictory form. This must be, on the account that Pappas sketches, what it would mean to respect him as other.

Pappas' account of hermeneutical respect seems questionable. On his view, interpretation of a poem should treat contradictory claims as part of what a poet means to say. Similarly, if an author makes claims that appear bad and harmful, the reader should ascribe immorality to her (see *Resp.* 362d–367e.). To respect the author is to acknowledge her potential badness and incoherence; it is to acknowledge that, irrespective of presumed difficulties with her verses, they are 'her own'. Carried to its logical conclusion, Pappas is committed to saying that respect for a poet might involve recognising that she is not a poet at all.

This position is even less plausible when applied to the Socratic dialogue, given its pedagogical ambitions. Socrates' teaching — his *psychagogia* — consists in helping the respondent to see the partiality of his current understanding, and, at a

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ See Futter 2013 and Futter 2017.

³⁵ Compare Hadot 1995:35–36.

³⁶ Pappas 1989b:259.

³⁷ *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

deeper level, to recognise his love of virtue and the good. One does not respect the interlocutor by treating him as he is, but by seeing him in relation to a conception of what he could be — that is, as somebody who does not contradict himself and is holistic in his understanding of the human good.

For Socrates, the true self is good and beautiful. Moreover, every soul is a knower. By treating an individual as if she knows, one treats her as she truly is. Thus, for Socrates, one should interpret wrong and confused statements about virtue as indicators of people's failure to be what they are. Since the interlocutor is wise and good in soul, he is not essentially mistaken about the nature of virtue. He is merely alienated from his own understanding.³⁸

The difference between the mode of interpretation recommended by Pappas and that of Socrates turns on deep questions about the nature of the soul and self, and, also, what it means to respect the true nature of a being. And this divergence itself depends on Platonic questions about what it is that truly belongs to oneself and what is accidental, like the barnacled exterior of the sea-monster Glaucus (*Resp.* 611c–d). For Socrates, to respect somebody is to see him as he might be, which is what he truly is, and to lead him to the beautiful light of the good. I suggest that a similar point applies to his handling of Simonides in *Republic* 1. Socrates' refusal to ascribe false or contradictory views to him is a way of framing a conception of what a poet should be, or, what comes to the same, truly is.

10. *Principled differences in Socrates' handling of the poets*

One of the appealing features of Pappas' account is that it promises to dissolve the contradiction between Socrates' handling of Simonides in book 1 and his handling of Homer and Hesiod in books 2 and 3. If the account is rejected, as I have argued that it should be, then the original problem remains. What then can be said about this inconsistent-seeming aspect of Socrates' behaviour? It appears that I need to explain away the contradiction to remain faithful to the method of interpretation that I have ascribed to him.

Socrates' deference to Simonides in *Republic* 1 is less a response to the virtues of the bard from Ceos than it is an expression of a conception of the poetic art (*technē*). One supporting argument is that he neither introduces specific lines or verses, as he does, and is required to do, in the *Protagoras*; nor does he concern himself with the evidence for ascribing the account of justice as fittingness, or helping friends and harming enemies, to him. Thus, Socrates' attribution of knowledge to the author is a matter of policy, taken up independently

³⁸ This view is conspicuously expressed in the myth of recollection in *Meno*, and, also, in the *Republic*'s allegory of the cave.

of historical or literary inquiry. Simonides *qua* poet must be taken to be a knower of the good. In this way, he prefigures Thrasyarchus' idea of knowledge in the true and precise sense; strictly speaking, the true 'artist' does not make mistakes (340c–341a).³⁹

A second argument for the claim that the figure of Simonides is less historical personage than ideal poet draws on some remarks made at the end of the elenchus. After the final refutation of the account of justice as helping friends and harming enemies, Socrates exhorts Polemarchus to fight with him as a partner 'against anyone who tells us that Simonides, Bias, Pittacus, or any of our other wise and blessedly happy men said this' (335e). As the references to Bias of Priene and Pittacus of Miletus make clear, the conclusion is not about Simonides but about the authority of the poet. The claim seems to be that the true poet is the sage — somebody wise and good about his or her subject matter, which is, in this case, justice and the human soul.

If this reading is correct, then the inconsistency between Socrates' handling of poets in book 1 and books 2–3 is not a contradiction in principle. One and the same conception of the poet as knower of the good is operative in both contexts but used to move in contrary directions. In book 1, it forms part of an argument that some exemplary poet does not mean to say anything wrong or confused; in books 2 and 3, it is used to support the conclusion that Homer and Hesiod are not true poets, and, for this reason, must be redacted, supervised, or exiled. Socrates has loved Homer since he was a boy, he tells us later in book 10 (595b); but 'nobody is to be valued more than the truth' (595c).

What is it about the context, interlocutors, or purposes in discussion, that explains why Socrates chooses to apply his conception of the good poet differently in book 1 as opposed to books 2–3? Why does he not dismiss the authority of Simonides on the grounds of his having said nothing clear, or 'objectively' assess the evidence for ascribing the account of justice as helping friends and harming enemies to him? Conversely, why does he not apply his account of the wise and blessed poet to Homer and Hesiod?

Three points are worth mentioning. First, we cannot fail to notice that the account of justice as helping friends and harming enemies is very much one that Polemarchus accepts.⁴⁰ He is the real target of the reinterpretation of Simonides in book 1. Socrates' goal is to detach his account of justice from the authority to whom he had appealed for support, to show that he is committed to an account of justice that transcends his understanding, and one which he is currently unable to

³⁹ For discussion of Thrasyarchus' account of knowledge in the strict sense, see Nawar 2018.

⁴⁰ See Bloom 1968:316–318 and 325.

put into words (see 334b7). By idealising Simonides, the poet and authority, Socrates attempts to refashion Polemarchus' conception of justice; his present inability to understand justice is reinterpreted as an inability to understand a wise and blessed poet.

Secondly, at 378e, Socrates says to Adeimantus that they are not poets, but founders of a city. On this account, it is appropriate for them to supervise the bards, and tell them what models they must use in composing their stories. It is clear from this that Socrates is concerned with the authority of poets as craftsmen of human virtue. He is not concerned to restore the reputations of 'living poets' but with the purification of Glaucon's luxurious city. Why is this so? Could he not purify the culture by reinterpreting rather than censoring Homer and Hesiod?

No, he could not. Socrates' charitable method of reading detaches the poet from objectionable content in his or her verses or sayings. Thus, he infers from the conceptual problems that come to light in the discussion that Simonides did not say that justice is helping friends and harming enemies (335e). This he can do because he does not introduce specific lines or maxims for consideration (*cf. Protagoras*). Socrates' hermeneutical charity is then to be distinguished from the allegorical interpretation that he mentions as a way of defending the tellers of impious tales about the gods (378d).⁴¹ For, unlike charity, *allegoresis* preserves the connection between authorship and the overt content of specific poems or verses, even as it adds layers of deeper meaning.

Given this distinction, we understand why Socrates does not defend Homer and Hesiod in books 2 and 3. To accomplish this, he would have to argue that they did not tell certain tales about gods and heroes. This is impossible. Homer and Hesiod said what they said — everybody knows this. This leaves allegorical reinterpretation as a possible method of rehabilitation. But allegorical readings are useless in the context of early education because children do not, he says, have the capacity to recognise allegory (379d). Since children cannot recognise allegory but are nonetheless 'formed' by the surface meanings of the stories they hear, such interpretations of Homer and Hesiod would be beside the point. This is the basic reason why Socrates cannot apply his conception of the wise and good poet to them.

Finally, we cannot overlook the fact that Socrates' action of founding cities in speech is designed to educate his new interlocutors, especially Glaucon, but also Adeimantus.⁴² Is this not accomplished by Socrates' own poetry, his reworking of Homer and Hesiod in creating images of cities and souls in speech,

⁴¹ Theagenes of Rhegium is usually regarded as the first allegorical interpreter of Homer. For discussion, see Small 1949.

⁴² See Brann 2011.

and, memorably, his own terrifying story of the cave?⁴³ What Socrates' use of the figure of Simonides in book 1 has in common with the images he creates in later books is the attempt to draw the interlocutor into the search for knowledge of the good. His poems are and aim to be 'summoners' of thought and understanding (523c).*

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⁴³ See Lear 2006.

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